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ABSTRACT

Retention has been indicated as one of the greatest weaknesses in online instruction. While a preponderance of literature about online instruction is available, concrete ideas about how to retain students are lacking. A DHHS grant for over one million dollars made it possible for the Wright State University College of Nursing and Health (Dayton, Ohio) to provide an Internet option enabling registered nurses to obtain a bachelor's degree. Now in the third year of the program the College has maintained an excellent retention rate ranging from 85 to 93%. Factors found to positively influence retention included: enhancing the comfort level of students with the technology, creating a sensitive online faculty persona generating trust in the environment, and addressing safety and security needs to support highly interactive experiences. These strategies promoted the development of relationships with "classroom" colleagues and fostered linkages necessary for students to remain connected to the learning experiences and continue to degree completion. (Contains 13 references.) (Author)

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Online Student Retention: Can It Be Done?

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Abstract: Retention has been indicated as one of the greatest weaknesses in online instruction. While a preponderance of literature about online instruction is available, concrete ideas about how to retain students are lacking. A DHHS grant for over $1 million dollars has made it possible for us to provide an Internet option enabling registered nurses to obtain a bachelor's degree. Now in the third year of the program, we have maintained an excellent retention rate ranging from 85 to 93%. Factors found to positively influence retention included: enhancing the comfort level of students with the technology, creating a sensitive online faculty persona generating trust in the environment, and addressing safety and security needs to support highly interactive experiences. These strategies promoted the development of relationships with "classroom" colleagues and fostered linkages necessary for students to remain connected to the learning experiences and continue to degree completion.

Student Retention in the Web Environment

Despite great attention to appropriate design for online courses, high student attrition and/or lack of re-enrollment continues to be the dominant concern about web-based learning. The literature addressing web-based learning contains few practical suggestions for connecting with students online to retain the high-touch in a high-tech environment. A study conducted at one small liberal arts university (Lynch, 2001), reported student dropout rates from Internet courses were as high as 35-50%, compared to 14% for traditional classes. Lack of feeling connected to other students has been cited as a major reason for students dropping out of online education. "This feeling of isolation is credited for the high attrition rates of this type of instruction." (Link & Scholtz, 2000, p. 275) Obviously, poor retention would preclude the viability of online learning unless strategies to increase student success and control costs related to student attrition can be reversed. How good can the method be if students do not to continue in the environment?

A DHHS grant for over $1 million dollars provided the opportunity to develop an Internet option enabling registered nurses to obtain a bachelor's degree in nursing. Analysis over three years of program delivery has demonstrated a remarkable retention rate of 85 to 93%. What factors affect student retention? We need to attend to preparing students for this brave new world of learning. Greater attention needs to be paid to directing the students' earliest online experiences. In redesigning this program for web-based delivery, it was rapidly discovered that student comfort levels and faculty persona made a tremendous difference in the student's perception of their potential for success. Students must feel safe and secure in the environment before they can develop the level of trust needed for positive learning and growth to occur. Trust is more difficult, but not impossible, to achieve when the learner is virtual. Trust is also essential for engaging students in highly interactive learning experiences. Students must feel free to take risks and challenge assumptions. Without this level of comfort between the student and faculty, they will be reticent to dispute ideas and stretch their thinking.

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They will also find the learning experience very isolating and many will retreat to the comforts of a classroom setting or be lost to continuing education entirely. This presentation will describe the strategies found useful in establishing trust and comfort that is essential for student retention.

Comfort Level with Technology

One challenge of online learning is the lack of learner familiarity with the delivery system. Therefore, it is important to remember that transitioning courses for online learning requires far more than a simple conversion to a web-based format. Lack of face-to-face contact with the learner requires new ways of thinking about how to connect with students. One of the first priorities for faculty is to assure that the technology does not get in the way of establishing this connection. "Comfort with technology is key to whether collaboration takes place." (Boettcher & Conrad, 1999, p.90) Students need to focus on the learning and not be distracted by the underlying technology. Therefore, faculty need to generate ways of assisting students to become comfortable with the delivery system. An important and useful method for achieving this goal was the development of a technical training manual. This manual contained step-by-step instructions for activities that students would perform in the online courses. These activities, or "boot camp challenges", gave students practice taking online quizzes, using the e-mail system to introduce themselves to their classmates, posting messages on a discussion board, discussing group assignments in the chat room, and uploading assignments to the course faculty, etc. These exercises enabled students to become familiar with and reasonably comfortable in the learning environment. A second method was the early inclusion of an informatics course that incorporated the essential computer skills that students would need to be successful throughout the program. Students acquired basic skills in computer application software (Word, Excel, PowerPoint, and Access) and information literacy skills (use of electronic resources available through the library and the World Wide Web). To provide relevance and to help students more easily acquire these skills, exercises using technology were designed especially to give students the opportunity to apply their newly acquired skills to their discipline. Facilitating the use of the technology will prevent frustrating technical dilemmas that interfere with learning.

Course Design and Instruction

Many factors related to good online course design and instruction apply when addressing the issue of student retention. A well-designed course is satisfying to the learner and will encourage return. Some factors not commonly published include the fact that not all faculty are well suited for the online instruction. Students will not hesitate to drop a traditional course when a favorable impression of the faculty is lacking. Online students look for several factors in their virtual faculty including flexibility, personal credibility, and the willingness to consider other perspectives without injury to the contributor. Nowhere is an instructor more vulnerable with this type of student critique than in the online environment. As such, instructors must be carefully selected for online teaching assignments. Faculty must be able to view their teaching from the student's perspective. The ability of the faculty to effectively communicate in the written format quickly becomes transparent to all. Attention to clarity, grammar, spelling, and punctuation are essential. Therefore, faculty who harshly criticize students' written work, when their own skills demand attention, may unwittingly establish an adversarial relationship with students. In addition, the communication of complex concepts necessary for critical thinking requires clear, concise, yet innovative teaching strategies because faculty are not able to evaluate non-verbal clues to comprehension online. Those who consider teaching online an easy contrast to the drudgery of the classroom, should carefully be evaluated. Simply posting PowerPoint content outlines used in traditional classroom presentations has little meaning in the online environment. Conversely, posting extensive lectures notes that do not contain material significantly different from the textbook is a time-consuming, boring approach. "A well designed distance course that has a focus on interactivity includes many topics for discussion, feedback from students as well as experts, and finally links to sources of pertinent information. Literature citations, journal articles and URLs are a few of the possibilities" (Parker, 1999, p.16). Developing content to foster interactivity is essential. Strategies for effective interaction online are varied but not limited. Most adult students desire interactive learning. We are reminded that "The web may be a great medium for discovery learning, but there has to be substance for the student to discover!" (Carlson & Repman, WebNet Journal, 2000, p.11). Without the credible faculty, retention will be a moot point.

Many factors influence the initiation and maintenance of trust in this environment. Assigning "busy work" is inappropriate in any learning environment, but it is particularly destructive in online education. The product of online learning is written. Students submit their work in the time intensive and laborious manner of a written format. When that product is perceived as "busy work", trust in the faculty member's expertise is quickly eroded. Students are less likely to become disgruntled with time spent in high-level, interactive activities that challenge their comprehension of materials through analysis, application, or synthesis strategies than with activities that require them to regurgitate what they have read. Therefore, online faculty must become designers or managers of learning experiences, shifting the work of learning to the student. "The students become the center as interactive collaborative learners." (O'Leary, 2000, p. 28) Students must feel confident that the faculty will not humiliate them by diminishing their contributions in the face of their peers. This degradation is preventable, but is devastating to continued progress once the student has experienced it.

Both boredom and extraordinary demands (far beyond the expectations for traditional education) are primary concerns for students considering continuation in the online learning environment. Flexibility should be considered the hallmark of effective, interpersonal communication. Rigidity becomes very evident in online education. Faculty who are insensitive to subtle cues about student needs will struggle to establish a trusting relationship with their students. Awareness of students' work at the beginning of a course can provide clues to changes in behavior later on. These behavior changes can include decreased activity level, diminished quality, and delayed responses. Theses are critical cues. They should alert the faculty member to solicit student responses regarding the meaning of the new online behavior pattern. However, when students provide feedback about the instructional methods, faculty must be flexible and willing to evaluate the validity of that input so that they can make meaningful adjustments in the course. Results of a study conducted by Indiana University Bloomington to profile the innovative teacher using technology concluded that all of the teachers who had changed their teaching with technology shared what one might call an "innovative personality". "They were willing to remain flexible and to modify their innovations as they received feedback from their students." In addition, they found that innovative teachers "liked changing things mid-stream to make them work better, not having to wait for the next time they teach the course." (Energizing the Innovative Teacher: Technology's Role, http://www.indiana.edu/~tltl/energy.html) One must also keep in mind that it is easy to become so enthusiastic about the endless possibilities of activities for online instruction that one creates an overwhelming workload for the students. Identification of this factor demands the flexibility to adjust the assignments appropriately. Teaching online can be far more demanding than classroom instruction. It is expected that the faculty will gain a close association with each student and must be responsive to their individual needs or risk losing the student.

Risk Taking

Online learners are subjected to a different set of stresses than those in the classroom. Writing in the online environment creates feelings of vulnerability in both the students and faculty. Written communication is perceived as a more permanent form of self-exposure than is typical in the conversational environment of the traditional classroom. Thus, faculty need to take the lead in setting the example for risk-taking online. This is particularly true if your subject matter involves sensitive, personal expressions or examples to make a point. If faculty want students to apply learning to personal experiences as a demonstration of a concept under discussion, it can be invaluable for the faculty to provide the first example. Openness on the part of the faculty can facilitate honest communication from the students. Faculty leading the way in risk-taking activities enables the braver students to test the waters and others will follow. If risk-taking is an expectation, then it must be handled carefully or students will not return to the setting.

Feedback

Retention is related to the development of a connected relationship between the faculty and the student. One mechanism for linking to the student is feedback. In the traditional classroom, faculty are able to respond to students immediately. In the online environment, this response time is likely to be delayed. However, the delay should be minimized as much as possible so that each student perceives the faculty as truly committed to their

learning. Timely review of materials supports student progress in a course. Long delays translate into student concerns about whether the faculty received the information or, if received, cared enough to review it. The literature suggests that the feedback time to online learners should not exceed 48 hours. A student who logs into a course on Sunday and has questions about the following week's assignments, will become very frustrated if the faculty does not respond to these questions very early in the week. The more connected the adult student feels to the learning situation and their faculty, the more likely they will be to continue in the course and to consider enrolling in future online courses.

Tone of Written Communication

Online students can be particularly sensitive to the tone of the written communication that they perceive between themselves and the faculty. Tone can be an elusive factor in written communication. However, it is a very important variable. How students interpret what faculty have written may be very different from the message that was intended. Most problems occur when faculty forget that it is imperative to be able to stand back from the message and view it from the students' perspective. This view relates not only to the content, but also, perhaps more crucially, to the nature of the message. Sensitive critiques including attention to word choice, understanding student perspectives, openness to errors in thinking, and warmth are factors that reflect the online faculty persona. For example, an authoritative style can easily be communicated to and resented by adult students online resulting in the inhibition of trust. When this occurs, students begin to produce what they believe the faculty wants rather than challenging their own thought processes. On the other hand, an investment in the creation of an overall trusting atmosphere will allow the students to perceive the safety net required to step-out-of-the-box and work to improve their critical thinking skills. The use of humor, especially, if it is self-directed and not sarcastic, can be an effective method for engendering trust. "Humor can lighten the burden of the learning curve for both the student and faculty and can generate a felling of sincerity among those in the class. (Parker, 1999, p. 16) But, any method that communicates a non-judgmental, open approach will assist the students to view the faculty as human and trustworthy. In any case, attention to the tone of each message requires additional time and effort on the part of the faculty. Lack of attention to tone, often will send learners running away from the experience.

Collaboration in Online Learning

Faculty who are successful in establishing an online learning community encourage student participation and discourage lurking behavior. Eisley (1991) and Schmier (1995) identified that learning is best accomplished when the learner is actively engaged in the process. Knowlton, Knowlton and Davis (2000) indicated that online discussions help students understand that there are real people that they are communicating with in cyberspace and that discussions facilitate the formation of an educational cyber-community of learners. Harasim (1989) pointed out the benefit of knowledge building that occurs when "students explore issues, examine one another's arguments, agree, disagree and question positions. Collaboration contributes to higher order learning through cognitive restructuring or conflict resolution, in which new ways of understanding the material emerge as a result of contact with new or different perspectives. (Harasim, 1989, p.5) This type of online teaching requires emphasis on quality rather than efficiency. A high level of interactivity allows faculty to quickly identify when students are confused or need additional information and gain a greater understanding of individual students' performance abilities. As noted in the University of Illinois Faculty Seminar Report (2000), "You get to know your students' minds, not just their faces". "Collaboration is an integral component of higher education not only because it supports active learning, but also, because it is required for the workplace for which students are prepared (Ben-Jacob, Levin, & Ben-Jacob, 2000, p. 8). It must be remembered that participation is not likely to happen unless it is deliberately planned. This format defines a learner-centered educational model where students operate in a more self-directed mode and have greater control of their own learning. It encourages student success and connectedness that in turns fosters retention. Again, these strategies are time consuming and require committed and dedicated faculty.

Conclusion

Clearly, many factors influence student retention. Initiation and maintenance of trust in the online environment is essential. Collaboration is essential for active learning and gives students valuable practice of skills that can lead to advancement in the workplace. Faculty contemplating teaching online must be cognizant of the need to prepare students for this new learning environment. Beyond technology preparation, faculty need to learn how to establish credibility with the students. Major factors that affect credibility include written communication skills, use of higher level teaching strategies, flexible approaches to learner concerns and needs, setting an example for risk-taking, timely feedback, and setting a tone that promotes open and honest interaction. These factors positively influence the development of mutual trust between the faculty and their students. Online education truly demands high-touch and requires selection of faculty who are able to demonstrate the qualities of excellence described above as well as dedication and commitment to student learning.

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